

Virginia Sweetspire

Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) is one of the most brilliant shrubs of the fall garden. Native from New Jersey to eastern Texas, it thrives throughout South Carolina. While it thrives in moist soils, it will adapt to even dry conditions if given plenty of water during its first year while becoming established. Virginia Sweetspire will grow well in either sun or shade, although it is most attractive where it receives at least 6 hours of sun.



Virginia sweetspire in bloom in May.
Janet Scott, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Height/Spread

Sweetspire usually grows three to five feet tall, although it may be taller and leggier in moist or shaded areas. Plants have a denser, more attractive habit when grown in sunnier sites. The form is typically arching and spreading. Plants spread readily by suckering, especially in moist sites. Mass plantings are usually more attractive than individual plants.

Growth Rate

Sweetspire transplants easily from containers. Growth rate is medium to fast especially in moist soil.

Ornamental Features

Small, white, sweetly scented flowers appear on four to six inch long bottle-brush like flower clusters in May or June. Depending on the cultivar, they may be held erect, or drape gracefully over the foliage. When planted in full sun, flowering is abundant and showy. Flowers last for several weeks and are followed by light tan seed heads that persist into fall, providing contrast to the brilliant fall foliage.

The rich green summer leaves of the species change to a mixture of brilliant red, orange and yellow, while cultivars have been selected for a consistent deep burgundy fall color. Fall color changes occur from October to December, with later color on the coast. Peak color is in November. Color is most intense in sun, but bright even in shade. Sweetspire is semi-evergreen, and colored leaves will remain until temperatures fall below 15 to 20 °F.



'Henry's Garnet' Virginia sweetspire showing fall color
Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Landscape Use

Sweetspire is a versatile plant in the landscape. It is an excellent substitute for burning bush where a smaller or more pest resistant plant is needed. Mass plantings can be used as a high ground cover or shrub bank. Because of its suckering habit, sweetspire is useful for erosion control, particularly near streams.

Problems

Sweetspire has no significant pests or diseases.

Propagation

Sweetspire can be easily propagated by home gardeners by cuttings, or division. Cuttings need about four weeks to root, and do so readily, with or without rooting hormone treatment. Root in a mix of three parts perlite and one part peat, kept moist, but not wet. Cuttings can be taken from May to September. Divisions of suckers can be done most easily in fall.

Cultivars

There are several named cultivars of Virginia Sweetspire, selected for improved fall color, form and size. The most commonly available are:

- 'Henry's Garnet' is by far the most common cultivar, with brilliant reddish-purple fall color. The six-inch long flower clusters drape over glossy dark green summer leaves. Its typical habit is three to four feet tall and four to six feet wide.

- 'Little Henry'TM (*I. virginica* 'Sprich') is only 2 feet tall with flaming red fall color. It makes an excellent high groundcover.

Other cultivars are occasionally seen.

Related Species

A couple of related species are well worth exploring.

- Hollyleaf Sweetspire (*Itea ilicifolia*) is a true evergreen, with spiny margined leaves that are bronze when emerging, maturing to dark glossy green. It grows six to 12 feet tall with a graceful, upright arching form. Flowers are very showy, on 12 inch long pendulous, flower clusters in mid summer or early fall. This species is hardy at least to the mid and coastal regions of SC, and in sheltered areas in the upstate. It is best planted in part shade.
- A cultivar of Japanese Sweetspire (*Itea japonica*) 'Beppu' grows to 2 to 2½ feet tall. It spreads and suckers rapidly and is well suited for use as a high ground cover and for erosion control. Fall color is deep purple red.

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